

Health and Wellness: Finding the Facts, Fighting the Fraud Avoiding Health Product Scams

This is Carol Kando-Pineda. I'm an attorney at the Federal Trade Commission, the nation's consumer protection agency. One focus of my work is outreach to the military community, giving you tips and tools to avoid scams, watch your wallet, and protect yourself in the marketplace.

Welcome to Part II of Health and Wellness: Finding the Facts, Fighting the Fraud. In Part I, I talked about how to get accurate and legitimate health-related information online. In this podcast, I'm going to talk with you about some of the deceptive claims and scams you might see out there and how to avoid them.

Well, let's get started. This first one I like to call, "avoiding the muscle hustle." It's all about buying exercise equipment. You might be thinking about setting up a home gym. You should know that scammers follow the headlines and sometimes they play on your emotions as well. So, you see this equipment, you think it's going to be great, it will change your life, it's really something you want to have. But you're going to see a lot of deceptive claims out there. So, you may want to be on the lookout for some of these kinds of things. So, ignore claims that a machine or a device or anything that you see out there can provide long-lasting, easy, no-sweat results in a short time. I mean, it's just false. You can't get the benefit of exercise unless you exercise. I know that sounds really common sense, but we all sort of fall prey to that and want to believe that this new thing is going to do it for me, but really, keep your head on. You don't get the benefits of exercise unless you exercise.

Now, you also should question claims that a product can burn fat off a particular part of your body, either your abs, or your hips, stomach, buttocks. If you want to get a major change in your appearance, it requires sensible eating and regular exercise that works the whole body. So make sure you always read an ad's fine print, whether it's for a machine or a product or anything. The results that they advertise might be based more on just using that machine. It may be based on restricting your calories. And it should be. You shouldn't believe that just using the machine will help you achieve those results. It may be an entire program that will do it.

You might want to be skeptical of testimonials and before-and-after pictures of "satisfied customers." Their experiences may not be typical. And just because one person had success with the equipment doesn't mean that you will, too. There's always the possibility that the testimonial isn't real, that they're just a shill as well.

Now, here's one you may not think about. You know when they say, "three easy payments of \$20 a month," or "\$49.95 a month." Do the calculations. Really think about what it's going to cost you. The advertised cost may not include shipping and handling, sales tax, delivery and setup fees. Get all those details before you order, and do that math. Know exactly what you're going to pay for whatever it is you're ordering. And you want to get the details on warranties, guarantees, and return policies. Thirty-day money-back guarantee might not be as worthwhile if you have to pay shipping and it's a bulky piece of equipment that you want to return. And also, check out the company's customer and support services. Call the advertised toll-free number to get an idea of how easy it is to reach a company representative and how helpful he or she is. You want to know that before you make any purchases. Wouldn't you

want to know that their customer service really isn't all it's cracked up to be before you spend money before you're trying to track them down?

Let's move on to some claims that can be a little more detrimental. These are the kinds of things that we call "miracle cures." You probably have seen ads for products that claim to cure arthritis, or Alzheimer's, or diabetes, many other conditions. More than likely, these are scams. Products that claim to cure all different kinds of diseases often don't do any of that. They don't cure anything. So, even though you really want to believe them, and you want to believe there's that miracle out there, you really want to be skeptical. Some of the claims that you'll see for these kinds of products, they claim to cure something that's an incurable condition. Your doctor has said there is no cure for that. Chances are you're not going to find something that's going to help you buying a product online. They make extraordinary promises like, shrinks tumors. If there were a product that did that, you would hear about it from your doctor.

Products that promise a long list of benefits, like, treats arthritis, infections, prostate problems, ulcers, cancer, baldness, and more. There is no product that can cure all of those things. You always want to be careful when you hear someone using fancy phrases like, "scientific breakthrough," or "ancient remedy" or terms of art like, "thermogenesis." Those are all designed to sort of distract you from the real issue.

These next set of claims take it even a step further. It's a particularly nasty kind of deception. They're bogus treatments for cancer. You know, it seems like almost everybody is touched by this disease. We all know somebody who has been treated for cancer. Perhaps we've been treated for cancer ourselves. And a lot of folks go online to get more information after a diagnosis or if they have suspicious symptoms. And many of us are seeing these ads, usually for powder or pills, but there are many other kinds of treatments as well. They claim that they can cure cancer or effectively treat it. These are the kind of products that, people are very desperate they're feeling very threatened, they feel like they need to act fast and find something that's going to help them treat this disease. So they're especially vulnerable to seeing these kinds of ads. If you're online and you see these kinds of products that claim they're going to cure or treat cancer, you really want to be skeptical.

Here are the classic signs of a scam that we've seen: the product claims that it can treat all different kinds of cancer. No one treatment works for every cancer or every body. All cancers are different. Even two people with the same diagnosis may need different treatments. That's one reason why it's best to be skeptical if the website or the ad claim they can treat everybody's cancer or every kind of cancer.

Secondly, and this is a little tricky, natural doesn't always mean that it's effective. Scammers take advantage of that feeling that can accompany a serious diagnosis. They promote these unproven and potentially dangerous products. Things like black salve, essiac tea, or laetrile by claiming that they're all safe, natural ingredients and that they're effective. But just because something is natural doesn't mean that it's safe or effective, particularly when it comes to treating cancer. I mean, arsenic is natural but that doesn't mean that it's safe to use.

Another thing to watch out for is that sometimes bogus marketers will use that vague language that we were talking about just a few minutes ago. Sort

of a trickery to take advantage of people. They try to confuse you a little bit. You know, they'll present these testimonials that the product treated somebody's cancer and they seem really honest and heartfelt, you know, somebody who you can really relate to. But they can be faked very, very easily. In fact, a lot of the time they may not disclose that they've just hired actors to come in and read a script. And sometimes even if they're getting people who actually took the product and feel like they got a positive result, it's not necessarily a reliable indicator that the product is going to be effective for you or for anybody else. That's not scientific research. Another thing that's a little tricky is when the marketer uses a lot of technical jargon. Again, we just referenced this. It can sound really impressive. Words like thermogenesis, but by itself it doesn't prove effective. They're just big words from the medical dictionary and is no substitute for talking with your doctor and trying to get the straight scoop.

Now, one thing that scammers very often will do is they'll offer you a money-back guarantee. Now, that's no proof that a product works. First of all, they may not actually give you the money-back guarantee. They may just say that. And even if they do give you your money back, that's not a reliable substitute for scientific evidence that the treatment is safe and effective. And you don't want to lose valuable time in your treatment by using a product that may harm you and certainly is not going to help you treat your cancer.

So instead, what should you do? Well, we always advise that folks talk to their doctor. You can ask about the risks of any treatment product, how it's going to affect your ongoing treatment or any medications you might be taking. You know, there are safe and effective complementary medicines out there. You'll want to do a little research and find out about those. If you're curious, do your research and then go to your health care provider and ask your questions. Talk to them about the product. Find out if there are any interactions with the treatment that you're undertaking or with any medicines that you're already on.

Some of the questions that you may want to ask: does this product work? Is there any research to support its effectiveness? What are the possible risks, side effects, or benefits for my specific case. You always want to frame it that way. You want to know how it's going to affect your particular cancer, your particular body. Your situation is going to be different from everyone else's. Will this product interfere with my current treatment plan? Has the product proven to be safe? And ask the doctor if you can talk about other treatments or products that might reduce the discomfort that you might be having or some of your other symptoms. Very often patients will look for some of these products to reduce side effects they may be having, nausea, or night sweats, dizziness, or things that may be making them uncomfortable and there may actually be products available that can help reduce those symptoms and you don't have to rely on these scammers and the products that they're selling.

So, for more information about these cancer treatment scams, go to ftc.gov/curious. You can click on "resources." That will give you a list of all kinds of government websites to look up cancer-related information and other questions that you can ask your doctor. If you think you've run across a bogus cancer treatment scam, you can report it to the Federal Trade Commission at ftc.gov/complaint, or to the Food and Drug Administration, fda.gov. You can also call 888-463-6332. And to get more information, you may want to call the American Cancer Society, 1-800-227-2345, or cancer.org.

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